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Its never as easy as it seems

Montenegro is far from perfect, but it is ready for reform. Will that be enough to become the 28th member of the EU?

According to a common stereotype in the Balkans, Montenegrins are idle and prone to sleeping a lot – so idle, in fact, that Montenegro slept through the collapse of Yugoslavia and only got around to declaring independence from Serbia in 2006. Almost 20 years on, however, a very different picture is emerging. Montenegro has abandoned its supposedly lethargic ways and is now demanding that EU accession talks be concluded this year. During a discussion at the Munich Security Conference, the Montenegrin president Jakov Milatović, whom host Wolfgang Ischinger failed to recognise, publicly put the 'when?' question to German chancellor Friedrich Merz.

Recently, Montenegro was able to provisionally close chapter 32 – 'financial control' – of the EU accession negotiations. Having closed 13 of 33 chapters, it is now the leading candidate for EU accession. In the capital Podgorica, there is thus hope that negotiations could realistically be concluded in 2026 and that accession could happen in 2028. The European Commission, too, has made positive noises. After the publication of a candidate countries report in November 2025, enlargement commissioner Marta Kos cited Montenegro as the most advanced candidate for accession, stating that it had made significant advances on the path towards EU membership. German foreign minister Johann Wadephul has made similar comments, praising Montenegro's reform process during his visit to the country in November 2025.

This is a novel situation – after all, a degree of enlargement fatigue has set in across the EU in recent years. Following Croatia's accession in 2013, EU expansion came to a standstill. Only after Russia began its war of aggression in Ukraine did Brussels, motivated by geopolitical concerns, start paying attention to the Western Balkans again, which has led to criticism from some think-tank and civil society commentators. They complain that this supposed success story is obscuring the true reality of Montenegrin reforms; after all, the country still has structural shortcomings when it comes to the rule of law, the fight against

corruption and the ongoing influence of Serbia. It's a situation that has been described as game of 'double bluff': Montenegro, for obvious reasons, is presenting itself as accession-ready, and the EU, for strategic reasons, is playing along.

Coming a long way

In Montenegro itself, there is genuinely strong popular support for EU membership. According to opinion polls, around 79 per cent of its people are in favour, and most of its political parties are clearly committed to European integration. Maida Gorčević, the country's minister for European affairs, has described Montenegro as a 'light snack' for the EU, a country so small (population of around 600 000) that its accession would go almost unnoticed in the bloc. Though such claims, often heard in Podgorica, may be made half in jest, there is also some truth in them; for the EU, Montenegrin membership wouldn't pose any major structural challenges.

Montenegro already meets numerous accession requirements. It has been using the euro since 2003, a fact that, despite initial scepticism, the European Central Bank and European Commission have now accepted. It has also been a NATO member since 2017. And in foreign policy, it largely follows the EU line, supporting sanctions against Russia, for instance, despite the significant role Russian investment long played in the country and the continued presence of Russian money. Prime minister Milojko Spajić of the Europe Now! party likes to talk of Montenegro as the next EU miracle. At an institutional level, Montenegro has certainly made progress: since 2020 it has, for instance, leapt from 105th place in the press freedom index to 37th. The national debt has dropped from 110 to 60 per cent of GDP, while the annual budget deficit has been cut from twelve to three per cent. In addition, Montenegro has started bringing its hitherto liberal visa policies into line with the more restrictive regulations of the EU, a long-standing bone of contention for Brussels.

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Given Montenegro's recent history, these are remarkable achievements. For more than three decades, the country was an El Dorado for money launderers, smugglers and drugs and arms traffickers. Under the long and unbroken rule of Milo Djukanović and his Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, the successor to the League of Communists of Montenegro, the country became a safe haven for figures from the world of organised crime. Djukanović

himself was involved in controversial privatisations as well as in deals with Russian oligarchs and Azerbaijani firms. State-run media were used to discredit those journalists and activists who shone a light on corruption and abuses of power. The political sea change that came about in 2020, when Djukanović und his party were consigned to opposition, marked a break with the past however. Since then, the Montenegrin authorities have been increasingly cracking down on established criminal structures, jailing more and more contract killers, drug runners, corrupt judges, police chiefs and former ministers. This break with inherited power structures represents a clear point of difference with neighbouring Serbia, where the political legacy of the 1990s lives on under president Aleksandar Vučić.

Not as easy as it seems

As impressive as these advances are, the accession negotiation chapters that have so far been closed are those that relate primarily to more straightforward issues such as the right of establishment and the freedom to provide services. Critics in Brussels point to the fact that Montenegro has so far failed to pass new anti-discrimination legislation that would bring it into line with EU law. Discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes directed against Roma, the disabled and members of the LGBTIQ community thus continue to go unpunished. International organisations have also highlighted failings in the execution of criminal justice. The Montenegrin parliament, though functioning as a check on power, remains vulnerable to political crises given the country's fragile democratic institutions. The harmonisation of visa policies with EU rules has not yet been fully implemented. And challenges in the fight against crime and corruption remain. Criminal networks from Serbia sometimes work closely with those in Montenegro, using legal businesses to launder money, and violent public confrontations between members of mafia organisations still occasionally take place.

Though waning, the ongoing influence of Montenegro's former sister state Serbia is a further complicating factor. Around 33 per cent of the population consider themselves Serbian. After the 2023 elections, Spajić's Europe Now! party was forced to enter into a coalition with right-wing Serbian nationalist parties, parties that, along with the Serbian Orthodox Church, allow Belgrade to enjoy continued influence over Montenegrin

politics. In its international relations, Serbia is widely known to maintain close ties with Russia and China. The autocratic regime of President Vučić has for years been attempting to steer a course that balances Brussels, Beijing and Moscow. In December 2025, Vučić proposed that the entire region join the EU at the same time – in practice, this was nothing more than a tactical attempt to delay both his own country's accession and that of its neighbour in order to retain a degree of regional influence. Were EU membership for Montenegro to be expedited, it would be a setback for Vučić's political ambitions, offering the Western Balkans a blueprint for successful, democratic, pro-Western reform. In addition, the country's accession would send a message to the Serbian population itself: if Serbs in Montenegro were to enjoy greater benefits than Serbs in Serbia thanks to EU membership, various groups within Serbia might be forced to reconsider their positions.

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Montenegrin accession may thus not be as easy is as is sometimes depicted in Podgorica. In the current negotiations, the key chapters 23 and 24 – 'judiciary and fundamental rights' and 'justice, freedom and security' – still need to be closed. Before that can happen, final rulings need to be handed down in cases of organised crime, high-level corruption and abuses of power. Such proceedings can take years, meaning accession in 2028 seems somewhat unrealistic.

For the Balkan candidate countries, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has made the risks of a regional power vacuum patently clear. EU membership for Montenegro would more effectively shield the Western Balkans from Russian influence while underlining the EU's strategic capabilities. It would also signal to sceptics within Europe – and especially those in the region itself – that the EU's expansion policy is more than just an empty promise. The real test is yet to come however. When it comes to the still outstanding areas of alignment, will the EU stick rigidly to its own criteria or will it continue to play a game of geopolitical double bluff? Montenegro has adopted a distinctly reform-oriented course but is far from perfect as an accession candidate.

Politically, however, it would be the easiest candidate country to assimilate. One with a small population, a clearly pro-European outlook, geopolitical relevance and no realistic alternative to the EU. The final stages of the reform process will be key. If the EU sticks to its demands for demonstrable reform on the remaining critical issues and Podgorica continues to enjoy political stability, then there is a genuine chance of Montenegro becoming the 28th member state in the foreseeable future.

If that happens, then the ‘land of the black mountains’ will have put its reputation for idleness to bed once and for all.



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